

Sexual Harassment

What Is It?

Discussions of sexual harassment cause embarrassed laughter and giggles. Some people shudder at the thought. Others joke about wishing someone would harass them.

Legally, it is a form of sex discrimination prohibited by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) definition says it is,

“unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature when submission to or rejection of this conduct explicitly or implicitly affects an individual's employment, unreasonably interferes with an individual's work performance or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.”

Sexual harassment can be in the form of verbal abuse such as insults, suggestive comments and demands; leering and subtle pressure for sexual activity; and physical aggressiveness.

True Facts

- P The victim as well as the harasser may be a woman or a man.
- P The harasser can be the victim's supervisor, an agent of the employer, a supervisor in another area, a co-worker, or a non-employee.
- P The victim does not have to be the person harassed but could be anyone affected by the offensive conduct.
- P Unlawful sexual harassment may occur without the victim suffering economic injury or being fired.
- P The harasser's conduct must be unwelcome.

Effects

- P If the victim is threatened and doesn't give in to the harasser, economic retaliation is commonplace, including discharge, unfavorable evaluation, or failure to get a raise or promotion.
- P The fear, anger, and loss of self-esteem that accompany sexual harassment can have a devastating psychological effect. This emotional burden cannot fail to affect the victim's job performance.
- P If the situation becomes intolerable and the victim quits, they will lose income. They may be denied unemployment compensation, finding it difficult to prove harassment was their reason for leaving.
- P If the victim submits, they may eventually be fired anyway because of potential embarrassment to the harasser. Advancement in the organization may be thwarted because of the unwanted liaison.

BLM Policy

Prevention is the best tool to eliminate sexual harassment in the workplace. The BLM director has taken steps to prevent sexual harassment from occurring and clearly communicate to employees that sexual harassment will not be tolerated, as shown in this quote from his policy statement.

It is the policy of the Bureau of Land Management to prohibit sexual harassment in all its various forms, to maintain a work environment that is free of sexual harassment and to take immediate and appropriate action where sexual harassment is alleged or found to have occurred.

Each BLM employee bears the legal and ethical responsibility to refrain from such unacceptable conduct in the work place. Managers and supervisors have the additional responsibility for taking immediate and effective action to enforce this policy when they become aware of or should have been aware of the sexually harassing activities.

Depending on the severity of the circumstances, effective action may mean removing the harasser from the work site and imposing discipline ranging from a written reprimand to removal from the Federal service. Disciplinary action may also be taken against a manager or supervisor who fails to take immediate action to end sexual harassment.

What Should You Do

- P The EEOC advises you to directly inform the harasser that the conduct is unwelcome and must stop.
- P BLM policy says you should immediately report this to a supervisor or manager. If they do not take action, contact an EEO Counselor within 45 days of the incident.

You should also:

- ▶ Recognize it is for what it is. Understand that it is not your fault. You have a right to complain and take action.
- ▶ Keep a written record of incidents of harassment and of your complaints and their results. If others are present during the harassment, ask if they saw and heard what happened. The observers will be more likely to remember the incident if you ask.
- ▶ Talk to friends, co-workers, and relatives about it. It is important to have a strong support system at this time. If you keep feelings to yourself, you'll remain isolated and powerless. Speaking out and documenting the incident(s) and forms of sexual coercion, you help yourself as you contribute to defining sexual harassment as a social problem.